

Commissioner's Weekly Wrap Up

DCS Communications Office

July 22, 2005

The Week Ahead

Thurs., July 28 – The Commissioner meets with Children's Rights, Inc. and the Technical Assistance Committee (TAC).

Fri., July 29 – The Commissioner visits Tullahoma.

Welcome New Directors

Submitted by Becky Phelps, Assistant Director of Community Residential Programs

The Division of Community Residential Programs is pleased to introduce our newest directors – Jacquista Christman, director of Inman Group Home in Tullahoma, and Eula Morris, director of Jackson Halfway House in Jackson.

Christman is a graduate of the Tennessee State University and holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and psychology. She previously worked at Inman Group Home as case manager prior to being promoted to the director position. Before joining DCS, Christman worked for the Bedford County Juvenile Court as a juvenile probation officer. We are always pleased to be able to promote from within and Christman's promotion is no exception. We feel very fortunate to have her on our team of group home directors.

Morris is a graduate of the University of Michigan with a bachelor's degree in both criminal justice and sociology. A native Tennessean, Morris has worked with the Michigan Family Independence Agency, where she served for almost 15 years. She worked as a family independence specialist, social services worker and service specialist/contract coordinator, covering all children's services programs and contracts. Morris was the contract manager for the second largest county in Michigan, covering all human services program contracts. Although she is new to DCS, Morris is not new to working with children and families. We are looking forward to working with her and feel that she is going to make a welcome addition to the staff of Jackson Halfway House.

Using E-mail Efficiently and Effectively

Submitted by Thomas Riche, Deputy Commissioner, Administration and Training

One of the most useful tools to come along during the last decade is the ability to communicate through the use of e-mail. Don't you love e-mail? It's faster than making a phone call and much speedier than (snail) mail. It is a tremendous time-saver because you can instantly deliver information to someone anywhere in the world. E-mail combines the speed and efficiency of the telephone with the written word. It allows you to transfer files and documents. Communication can take place whenever and wherever users choose, freeing correspondents from the office and minimizing the time difference between correspondents in distant locations. The advantages of using e-mail can go on indefinitely.

Unfortunately, we have become so accustomed to using e-mail that we sometimes discard other, more practical, means of communication. It is much easier to give instruction, express feelings and record details in e-mail than it is to use any other means of communication. Although this method of communication is *efficient*, is it always the most *effective* way to communicate?

If you want to give direction, discuss a personal issue with a subordinate (such as his/her performance review) or schedule a meeting for a specific place and time, you probably shouldn't use e-mail as the only means to communicate that message. In the case of the performance review, e-mail should not be used at all. In one organization where I previously worked, the CEO told me she doesn't hold regular counseling with her subordinates because she finds e-mail to be much more convenient. She admitted how hard it is for her to look a subordinate in the face and tell them their performance is substandard. So, she does it by e-mail. Not only is this method ineffective, it is cruel and insensitive. Due to the fast nature of e-mail, things can easily become confused and messy. Sarcasm and humor often don't translate in e-mail, and a flippant remark could hurt both the sender and the receiver of the message. A good rule of thumb might be, "If you wouldn't say it to the person's face, think twice before you commit it to e-mail. Keep in mind that anything you send is recorded permanently on the server. The Office of Information Systems people tell me that even after an email is deleted, it remains on the server.

Here are some guidelines for writing efficient and effective emails.

- Make effective use of the subject line. This is the first part of your message the recipient sees, so it's also the most important. Describe the subject in just a few words. If you need the reader to respond by a certain time, put that in the subject line.
- Keep the message simple and short. Try to keep the message on the screen, without having to scroll down to see it all. Keep your sentences short and use bullet points to make lists stand out. If you have a long document to send, attach the file to the e-mail and write a brief description or instruction in the e-mail.
- Make it easy to read. The first sentence should contain the most important information. The rest of the e-mail should be supporting text. Remember that many people gloss over electronic messages and don't read every word.
- Make the message easy to respond to. If you don't clearly state what the reader needs to do in response, he or she may not do anything at all. Give all needed information and, if possible, write the message so all you need is a yes or no response. If you need a reply, try mentioning that in the subject line.
- If you require more than three e-mail messages to the same person regarding the same subject for clarification, it's time to pick up the phone and call that person.

- When using email as your preferred method of communication, always be specific and to the point. As mentioned in the narrative above, feelings and humor don't necessarily translate the way you intend.

And, finally, remember how many e-mails, junk mail and spam you receive on a daily basis, and consider that when sending e-mails. After taking off a week for a much overdo vacation, I returned to work to find well over 200 e-mails. There were many that required an immediate and direct response from me, but over half of them reached my mail box because the recipients hit "reply all", causing me to receive an avalanche of the same e-mails. And then there are those "text book" e-mails containing 5 or 6 pages of information that doesn't get to the point until the last sentence in the last line. My point is this: Be considerate when generating and responding to e-mails; be brief, and know when e-mail is not necessarily the best way to communicate.

East CPS Team – Swarming for Excellence

Submitted by Becky Lakins, CPS Team Leader, Claiborne/Granger/Hamblen Counties

How did the East CPS teams go from 5,995 over-dues on August 1, 2004 to 209 over-dues on July 20, 2005? It was the teamwork of all CPS case managers (even those without over-dues), team leaders, team coordinators, clerical staff and the regional administrator, as well as former CPS staff in juvenile justice and social services and, yes, even staff from Central Office. We additionally had several staff from other regions come to assist us in the final weeks of our "swarm". All were willing to work together to ensure that the safety and well-being of children was protected, all the while diligently laboring to close overdue cases to meet the timeframes set forth. Willing spirit, professionalism and tenacity can be used to describe the case managers who worked so many hours to finish the job that they started or inherited.

We in the East Region were very fortunate in that team leaders, team coordinators and the regional administrator were willing to do "leg work", type, do home visits and interview families from old cases – whatever it took to ensure that the investigations were completed appropriately and closed (even cook us lunch on the weekends!).

Team leaders and case managers have already developed plans to ensure that caseloads and casework are evenly distributed and monitored closely. Protocols have been developed that will have any case over 60 days being reviewed by the team coordinator in consultation with the case manager and team leader. Any case going over to 75 days will require a meeting with the regional administrator. We have insured him that **NO** cases will go over 120 days, thus requiring a trip to Nashville to meet and greet the Commissioner!

This will be accomplished more easily with the additional staff members who have been added to our region. Rightsizing determined that our region was almost 40 positions short! Hopefully, we will be able to access our new positions in the near future and get qualified staff trained and on line.

The bottom line is that we in the East Region are extremely proud of the work that has been accomplished by our CPS teams. We feel that we have accomplished the impossible; it just took a little time and a dedicated staff to do it.

Functional Assessment: A Partnership with Families

Submitted by Latricia Halls, Montgomery County

On Wednesday, I experienced the Functional Assessment during a Child and Family Team Meeting.

I was thrilled to see how the functional assessment worked. When the mother of the children arrived she appeared to be uncomfortable, teary-eyed, and confused. When the meeting first started you could feel there was some tension. However, by the end of the staffing, we had a real team and everyone volunteered their services and their skills. Landra Orr was there to support and help me. As the meeting progressed, I could see Landra incorporating the functional assessment principles. Landra and I made sure the mother's feelings were reflected and that the mother was heard. The more Landra and I reflected the mother's feelings and statements, the mother appeared to be more open. The funniest thing is that as the mother became comfortable everyone else started to feel at ease. At the staffing you could see that the mother was building trust with the team members (those people at the meeting). I believe that because we set a tone (voice tone) everyone remained calm. We maintained eye contact and you could see all the team members were being mindful of the mother's feelings, and a lot of empathy and genuineness were being demonstrated.

Following is from a letter I received from the resource parent:

Dear Ms. Halls,

I would like to take a moment to express my opinions regarding today's meeting. I was impressed with the way this meeting was handled. I also feel that the outcome has a much more likely chance of being successful because of the way we all worked together. I do not know if this meeting was held under a new policy, but if it was not we might need to rework our policy to incorporate many of the methods that were used today.

When I first arrived, I found a biological mother that was upset, terrified, depressed, and often tearful. This young woman was afraid, her entire world had just collapsed and she had lost her children. It felt to me as if she looked at me as a person that wanted to take her children and the Department of Children's Services was her sworn enemy.

You started the meeting by setting ground rules. I respected the way you set those rules. By letting us all participate in setting these rules, you allowed the mother to set a rule that I felt was very important to her. I would have never known she needed to read my lips when I spoke. Furthermore, she may have felt lost in the meeting, simply by not knowing what we were all saying.

Because we all participated in an open discussion that was not a direct attack on the mother, she became more settled. She seemed to leave behind the terrified state and became more open to discussing the needs for her family and children. She even began smiling and talking freely

about the family situation and their needs. I believe that making her understand that we were here to help her and her family to overcome their crisis, she was able to relax and accept that aid.

I felt that CPS being present and giving a description of the situation is an asset. It allowed everyone on the team to understand the full circumstances surrounding the case. I like the fact that it was done up front and the only place to go from there was forward. By getting that out of the way, it allowed the remainder of the meeting to be productive, instead of having to repeatedly return to the negative issues throughout the meeting. I was pleased to see you ask her to tell her version of the situation. I thought it was a wonderful approach when you asked her to tell us why *she felt* the children were removed. It allowed her the opportunity to feel validated and respected as a person and as a parent. This is very important to me personally and I really admire you for allowing her to do that.

You laid out the goals to the mother in simple layman's terms, and that really seemed to work. When she realized we are here to help her get her children back and to make sure she has the tools and skills to parent her children in the future, her whole demeanor changed. I feel that she looked at us as a team and as a resource. We were no longer the enemy, we had become her lifeline. I could then hear her talking about the positive changes this was going to make in her life.

I felt that the worker from Nashville handled herself very professionally, without making everyone feel uptight. She verified every bit of information by asking questions in a calm and supportive way.

I was also pleased that you allowed me to participate by speaking at the meeting and allowing me to volunteer visitation and mentoring to the mother. I felt that by allowing me to address her directly, it allowed her to see me as someone she can turn to instead of just a foster mother. I know some foster/biological parents are not able to work well together, but by allowing us the opportunity to try is admirable. I think so much is possible when we can all work together in this way.

It is my opinion that by conducting the meeting the way you did, we created a very caring and supportive team that will work well together in achieving the goals that will be laid out in the permanency plan next week. In addition, we achieved it without belittling the parents about what they did wrong, and by encouraging what can be done right. Thank you so much for letting me take part in this meeting. I would like to see these meetings happen this way in every case.

Sincerely,

Robin Ward



Never look down on anybody unless you are helping him up. – Jesse Jackson

